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CIA's shot at media backfires

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WASHINGTON—The CIA has been conducting a concerted campaign to stifle news media coverage of certain defense or national security issues, well-placed sources confirm, but the operation has backfired and has left the intelligence community embarrassed and in disarray.

The campaign was launched several months ago by CIA Director William Casey and Lt. Gen. William Odom, the director of the National Security Agency [NSA], ostensibly to limit damage to U.S. intelligence programs that could be caused by detailed news reporting on the federal prosecution of spy suspect Ronald Pelton.

Pelton, a former \$24,000-a-year communications specialist at the NSA, is on trial in Baltimore on charges of selling sensitive information to the Soviet Union.

In their campaign, Casey and Odom threatened criminal prosecution of news organizations that provided too much detail of the top-secret intelligence operations that Pelton was said to have compromised and recommended that the Justice Department bring charges against NBC News for reporting on the Pelton case even though NBC had broadcast the disclosures previously.

Later, they warned the media that "speculation and reporting details beyond the information that was actually released at trial" should be treated warily.

But senior congressional and administration sources confirm that the campaign had the broader intention of trying to stop the news media from publishing or broadcasting unauthorized government information—"leaks" in Washington parlance.

The campaign also served to divert public attention from the government's seeming inability to protect the nation's secrets from espionage. In the last 18 months, serious damage has been done to national security by convicted or suspected spies in the CIA, the NSA, the Navy's antisubmarine warfare program and Navy communications and Middle East intelligence operations.

By the end of last week, it was clear that the campaign by Casey and Odom, both known for the vigor of their anti-Communist views, had run aground.

One Justice Department official said federal prosecutors were cool to Casey's suggested prosecution of NBC. The report that sparked Casey's recommendation to do so was virtually identical to an NBC story on the Pelton case aired almost six months earlier that the CIA had ignored.

The White House publicly backed off from part of Casey's warning to the media, saying it used the wrong word when it cautioned against reporting on "speculation" that went beyond information at the Pelton trial. "Speculation is a very loose term," White House spokesman Edward Djerejian said Friday. "In no way do we mean to imply by use of the word speculation prior censorship or press censorship." Casey also later acknowledged that he should have used a different term.

Moreover, Casey's and Odom's campaign had the effect of drawing media attention to the Pelton trial, which probably would have been sparsely attended without the furor caused by their speeches and warnings.

Indeed, when testimony began in the trial last week, television cameras lined the halls of the Baltimore courthouse where the Pelton case was being heard. The courtroom was packed with reporters and spectators, and one high-level White House official said he was "stunned" to learn how much detailed information the CIA and the NSA had authorized the federal prosecutor to place in the public record.

"The problem is that the press does a hell of a lot better job getting its information out than the government does of keeping its secrets," said the official, who insisted on anonymity. "People are trying to figure out how to deal with this."

A key aspect of the campaign by Casey and Odom was that journalists reporting on the charges leveled at Pelton would harm national security by delving into details about highly sensitive U.S. communications intelligence capabilities that came out in the trial.

The Washington Post, also targeted in the campaign, withheld

details in one of its stories involving the Pelton case, saying it could not determine whether the national interest would be harmed by publication. But Casey's and Odom's credibility was shattered within days of the warning to the Post and NBC when the trial opened and federal prosecutors placed on the public record details about the NSA that one expert characterized as "unprecedented."

However, because Casey and Odom themselves had cleared release of the details weeks before the trial started, their campaign seem aimed at intimidating the news media rather than limiting disclosures.

When NBC, for example, aired a report May 19 on Pelton, network correspondent James Polk said that Pelton was suspected of giving away a highly sensitive NSA program code-named Ivy Bells, "believed to be a top-secret underwater eavesdropping operation by American submarines inside Russian harbors."

The NBC report, however, was virtually identical to a report the network aired on Nov. 27, 1985. Furthermore, the code name Ivy Bells already had been disclosed in court records and stories about U.S. submarines operating inside Soviet harbors had been published in the 1970s.

When federal prosecutor John Douglass addressed the jury in his opening remarks, though, he went into much greater detail than the NBC report or any other news story published about the Pelton case. He told the jury about the NSA's ability to exploit, process and analyze coded Soviet communications that travel by radio, microwave and cable between "terminal points" such as Soviet military and civilian centers.

The details involving the NSA never had been publicly disclosed previously. Pelton's former boss at the NSA, Donald R. Bacon, told the jury about Soviet specialists at the agency who intercept communications written by the "highest-level" Soviet authorities.

The White House official said that he was surprised at the details that were disclosed at the trial. He said he was told that the decisions to release the details were made after the CIA and NSA conducted a "hard-headed analysis" and de-

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termed that the Soviets already knew of the details released at the trial.

A Late in the week, Casey, Odom and CIA Deputy Director Robert Gates gave an interview to Associated Press to try to explain the campaign.

They said that much information about the intelligence programs for which they are responsible has been "severely damaged by disclosures of sensitive information. This is costing the taxpayers billions and billions of dollars, and more importantly . . . our national security is at risk."

Gates said the CIA wants "acceptance of the notion that the media does have a responsibility to the country to be careful about these kinds of things. And second, to convey to you all that when you hear these things which we are trying to stop coming out of the government that you will be willing to consult with us," Gates said.

"Hopefully if it is a serious problem we can persuade you not to use it at all. But if you insist on going ahead, to try to develop a way of conveying what you want to say that minimizes the damage and the risk to our sources."

But a look at the serious intelligence compromises exposed over the last 18 months shows that most stemmed from spying by government or former government employees, not classified information published by the media.

Navy Secretary John Lehman, for example, said that the Soviet Union gained vast information about the U.S. antisubmarine warfare program and Navy communications from the spy ring headed by John Walker, a former communications officer in the Navy's submarine force who had sold intelligence information to the Soviets.

Classified reports on U.S. military strengths and other U.S. intelligence information regarding the Middle East allegedly were sold to Israel by Jonathan Pollard, a civilian intelligence analyst with the Naval Investigative Service currently in custody on espionage charges.

Larry Wu Tai Chin, a CIA analyst, committed suicide after being convicted of selling classified intelligence reports to the Chinese government. Reagan administration officials said Chin's activities caused a serious security breach.

Pelton was given access to highly sensitive information while working as a relatively low-level communications specialist at the NSA.

Even the CIA itself and the government may have given away some of the most sensitive national security secrets to Vitaly Yurchenko, the erstwhile Soviet defector to the U.S. who embarrassed the CIA by going back to Moscow after four months in U.S. custody.